

Sermon Series: Talking to God  
The Dos and Don'ts of Prayer  
March 8, 2009  
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Today, we continue our sermon series about the nuts and bolts of prayer. As you may remember, last week we talked about why we pray, and I made the point that there really is no wrong way to pray. While we can never pray the perfect prayer, because of the Spirit's interceding on our behalf, we can never pray a not-good-enough prayer.

I believe that is true, but I also think there is more to be said about how we pray. While the scope of what constitutes an effective prayer is huge, there are limits. We can't just bow our heads and close our eyes and say anything we want and have it count as a prayer. Prayer is meant to be sacred speech, something we would feel comfortable saying to God. Not all prayers meet that criteria.

Here's an example, and you'll be glad to know that for the first time in weeks I'm not going to quote a movie. I'm going to quote a TV show. On the show "30 Rock," Alec Baldwin plays a smarmy TV executive named Jack Donaghy. Jack is dating Elisa, played by Selma Hayek, and for Valentine's Day he had made reservations at Plunder, a very posh and exclusive restaurant. But Elisa, being a good Catholic, insists they go to church first. Jack knows this could make them late to Plunder, but when Selma Hayek asks you to go to church with her, you don't argue.

While in church, just as the priest is about to begin the Lord's prayer, Jack calls his personal assistant Jonathan to let him know that he and Elisa aren't going to make it to the restaurant on time. Instead of using his cell phone during church, which would be reason for eternal damnation, Jack tries to pass off his conversation with Jonathan as a conversation with God. He says this into his phone:

"Our Jonathan, who art in the office, hallowed be my reservation. If you are able, hold my table, at Plunder as we will not be there by seven. Have them delay our heavenly dessert, and forgive us our lateness as we forgive those who cause lateness against us." I don't pretend to know how God thinks, but I'm not sure that prayer made it all the way up to Heaven. That scene highlights an issue I think we run into a lot with prayer. It's not so much a problem of what we pray but the motivation behind our prayers. The "30 Rock" story is the modern equivalent of what we hear in our scripture passage this morning about the Pharisee and the tax collector.

On the surface, Luke's hearers would have automatically known the good guy and the bad guy in our story. When Luke says, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector," his audience probably thought, "Oh yeah, I know who's going to be the punchline of this story." The Pharisee was a religious leader, a faithful servant who went above and beyond his religious duties. And the tax collector was a scoundrel, a traitor who collected money from his own people to give to the Romans.

So imagine the surprise of Luke's audience when it's the tax collector who went home justified before God. Why is the bad guy made into a hero? Why is the good guy demonized? And what does this tell us about the dos and don'ts of our own prayers?

The Pharisee did a lot of things right in this story, but I believe his biggest mistake was not anything he said, but why he said it. There's a big difference between praying for yourself and praying selfishly. I've had people say to me, "I just don't feel comfortable praying for myself. There's so many other people who need prayers more than I do." Yes, that's probably

true. But that doesn't mean it's wrong to pray for ourselves. I believe that's an important part of a vibrant prayer life. What we have to check within ourselves is the motivations behind what we pray for.

First of all, it helps to understand that prayer is a privilege. Before Jesus came along, the main relational connection between Jews and their God was through the temple priests. If you wanted to pray or needed to ask forgiveness, you did so by presenting yourself to the temple priests and offering a sacrifice. You couldn't call the CEO directly; you had to go through customer service.

But because of Jesus' sacrifice, that intermediate step was rendered unnecessary. When Christ died on the cross, the gospels say the temple curtain was torn in half. That curtain represented the separation between the people and God. So through Jesus, that separation no longer existed. Through Jesus, we are given a direct line to the top. We don't have to talk to customer service, we don't have to sit on hold and listen to Muzak or angels playing their harps. Prayer is our direct connection to the power of God.

Therefore, it is to be used wisely and reverently. We're talking to God! That doesn't mean we shouldn't share with God things we consider trivial or insignificant. Instead, I believe God likes to hear about the details of our lives. God rejoices in every aspect of our relationship. But because we're talking to God, we need to pray in a Godly way, which the Pharisee didn't do. He prayed loudly and proudly. Luke says he "stood up and prayed about himself." Notice, he didn't pray *for* himself but *about* himself. If you're such a good person, chances are God already knows that. And if you feel it's necessary to recite your resume to God, chances are your prayer agenda has very little to do with God and a whole lot to do with you. If we fill too much of our prayers with ourselves, we don't leave any room for God.

Prayer is not an entitlement and it's not to be taken for granted. We don't have the right to pray and we shouldn't pray like we deserve the answer we want. Prayer is a privilege and the appropriate attitude to adopt when approaching prayer is not the pride of the Pharisee, but the humility of the tax collector. He doesn't recite his resume, because it's not impressive. He doesn't compare himself to others, because he'd lose that battle. He simply stands off at a distance, a sign of reverence, and asks for God's mercy.

That's a much different approach to prayer than the Pharisee. The Pharisee's prayer emphasized separation and division: "Thank you that I'm not like them." An effective prayer doesn't point to ourselves – look how great I am, God! - or to others – thanks that I'm not like him, God. An effective prayer points to God and God's power and mercy.

My guess is not too many of us are in camp with the Pharisee. His issue is one of arrogance in prayer and I don't know that we always feel spiritual or devout enough to take that same stance. But I do believe we may suffer from another form of arrogance when it comes to prayer, and it was to do with how we react when God responds.

Here's an example. A man was driving around a shopping mall parking lot looking for a space. It was Saturday, so the mall was packed and the lot was full. The man was in a big hurry so he prayed, "Dear God, please let there be a parking space close to the door so I can get a move on." As soon as he finished saying "Amen" he saw a car backing out of a spot right up front near the doors. Happily he said, "Dear God. Never mind. One just opened up."

This man's error was not one of arrogance but of acknowledgement. The only beneficiary of his prayer was himself, which is inherently selfish. And he probably thought he landed this first-rate parking space because of his patience and good timing, forgetting that his prayer to God may have had something to do with it.

Now, let me state right now that I don't believe God answers prayers about parking spaces. I think one of the don'ts of prayer is to not give God credit or blame for things that should rest on our shoulders. Often times we pray for God to alter reality when we're the ones who created the situation in the first place. Here's another example of misplaced responsibility. One Christmas my aunt gave our daughter Sydney a gift she had really been wanting. When Sydney told her how much she wanted this present, my aunt exclaimed, "Praise the Lord! God let me right to that toy in the store." And I wanted to say, "Couldn't God have led you to a flat-screen TV?" Yes, I believe God is with us and watches out for us and protects and guides us. And yes, I believe all good things come from God. But when we start giving God all the credit for the good decisions we make, we also open up the door to making God the scapegoat for all the bad decisions we make.

We have been given the gift of prayer, not ask for what we want, but to ask for what God wants. We'll talk about this more in the next couple weeks. The ultimate goal of any of our prayers should be for God's will to be done. I often close my prayers by saying, "In Jesus' name." That's not just a formulaic involuntary saying. When we pray, we are challenged to make sure that whatever we are saying can be said in the name of our Lord. Can we ask for healing in Jesus' name? Of course. Can we giving thanks for our lives in Jesus' name? Sure. That's praying for ourselves. Can we ask for an open parking space in Jesus' name or for a flat-screen TV in Jesus' name? To me, that's a misuse of the privilege. That's praying selfishly.

An effective prayer points to God by acknowledging God's healing power or giving thanks to God for God's work in our lives. In fact, how we come to prayer should be equivalent to how we should come to worship: humble, reverent, expectant, hopeful. Did you come here hopeful today? Did you come expecting that God was going to meet you here? Or is this just another worship, like our prayers are just another prayer? We don't come to prayer or worship with an attitude of, "OK, what can you do for me?" "Exalt me, God, because I'm so great." "Find me that perfect parking space." We come to worship and to prayer with the expectation that God is present and active, regardless of the outcome. In our prayers, if we come as ourselves, not trying to be someone bigger or better or more faithful than we actually are, we leave room for God to be God. Pray with humility, pray with confidence, pray with hope. And then leave room and trust that God is at work.